

[Herbert Mason]

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(dup of 15460 Conn. 1938-9 Mason)

Herbert Mason, Walden, N. Y., former local resident who is visiting at the home of relatives at Reynolds Bridge:

"The knife business is on the bum in Walden, too. Used to employ more than 1200 men in the factories there; now there's not more than a hundred and fifty workin' at the trade altogether, I should say. There was the Upper Shop and the Lower Shop—New York Knife Company—and in the Upper shop alone they employed one time six hundred and fifty men. It's been shut down now since 1927. Fella who used to be superintendent of the whole plant is workin' in my room in Schrade's now, as an inspector.

"He's quite a fella for workin' on knives in his spare time. He's got an exhibit at the New York World's Fair—all pearl handled knives, the only knife exhibit down there. There isn't a knife company in the country interested enough, or well enough off, maybe, to sponsor an exhibit there, think of that. And this fella I's talkin' about got his in what they call the Manual Arts Department, as an example of fine workmanship. He's had inquiries about the work from all over since that exhibit opened, even from Africa and of course he turns 'em all over to Schrade's, so the company got a little business out of it, anyway.

"Thirty-two years I been in Walden. Went up there from Meriden. I worked in seven different knife companies since my father taught me the trade right here in Reynolds Bridge. And I still think the knife business could come back, if it was given half a chance. If the people were educated to understand the difference between good knives and junk. Did you know there was more than 2 215 operations on an ordinary knife in the old days? And every one done with care and precision. That's why knives were made good. Just the blade forging alone, for instance. Shaping out the blade they called 'sooding'. And

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‘tangling’ was putting the tang on it, and ‘smithing’ and putting in the nail nick was the final operation before it went to the grinder. And the hardening. The old timers could tell by the color whether a blade was coming right or not. If it was getting too dark a blue blue they'd say it was ‘running too much’ and dip just the point in water. Stop the ‘running’ right off. And that's one thing I don't think they can do today with their modern methods half as well as they used to. You see now they put the blades in a big cylinder like and heat them with lead and harden then all at once. But they don't get the same results. That's one thing. Of course they never ask us old timers what we think about anything. Just go ahead and do it, and you can't tell 'em. Like the time they thought they could press out the pearl. It just can't be done. I don't know how much work they spoiled before they gave it up as a bad job.

“I worked in the Upper shop till it shut down and then in the Lower shop twenty two years altogether, and then I went to Schrade's. Been there ten years now. I don't care much for the country up there, to tell you the truth, I'd rather be livin' right back here at Reynolds Bridge, but there isn't anything for a knifemaker around here. I's only workin' twenty four hours a week now, but that's better than nothin', ain't it?

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“Yes, Reynolds Bridge used to be quite a place. You live around here? Well, you don't remember of course. It makes me blue to see this old shop fallin' to pieces down the road here. I started workin' there, when the Catline owned it. Funny, when I was a kid. I used to deliver papers to Dr. Ferguson—you know he owned the place for a while—and he took quite a likin' to me. He says to my dad, he says, ‘that's quite a manly little fella of yours Mason, and when he gets through school, I'd like to have him come in the office here and help me out.’ So it mighta been a good chance for me, only before I got through school they had the strike, and Dr. Ferguson got disgusted with the place and sold it, and so I never got to work for him after all. The Catlins owned it when I finally did go in.

“I remember when I first went up to Walden, there was quite a few of the old English families up there. Used to call the town ‘Little Sheffield’ in those days, but there ain't

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many of 'em left any more. One of the first fellas I met when I went to work was old Mr. Oates, who used to live in one of the company houses here. He was always talkin' about Reynolds Bridge, and what a fine place it used to be. Why, the dances and the good times they used to have here, it was more of a social center than Thomaston.

"They were funny, those old fellas. Never saved a penny, but they could always get a job and they didn't stay very long anywhere. I remember Mr. Oates tellin' me about Northfield. 'I was gettin' damn well tired of the place,' he says, 'but I didn't save no money. So what did I do? I sold me bloody overcoat!'

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"I remember my father tellin' about some of the old fellas that used to work here, and the tricks they were always up to. He used to tell about the fella down in the saloon around the corner, one night, he stood up at the bar with one of these one bladed knives we used to call 'boy knives,' and he offered to bet anybody a drink they couldn't open it. Well, of course he got plenty of takers, and nobody could open the blade. Then he'd bet that he could do it. He'd put the knife behind his back and bring it out with the blade open. What he did, of course, he had two knives. The first one—that they couldn't open—had a little small pin inserted in the end, stuck in a hole right through the handle so small you couldn't notice it. And the second knife was made just like it, but without the pin, of course. He had them crazy, my father said.

"A lot of them left Walden during the war. Knifemakers could get work anywhere then, at big wages. They were given preference. They tell me there'd be big long lines of men outside the mills waiting for interviews, and when the employment manager found out there was knifemakers there, he'd take 'em right out of line and put 'em to work. They could do anything, you see, polishing, buffing, hardening, grinding—and do it good. I stayed where I was, because they made it worth my while.

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“It ain't the same of course, as it was when first I went there. You can't to do the things you used to do. I remember when I first went to work there was fifty five fellas in the room—that was in the Upper shop—and on a warm summer day if we felt like it was too nice to work—we'd knock off and go out and have a 5 ball game. You can't do that these days, of course. I can't explain very well, the changes that have come about, but I'd like to take you through the knife shop up home, and then I could show you. If you're ever up that way drop in and ask to be shown around the place. They'll be glad to do it. Especially if you're goin' to write anything about it. It'll be a free ad for 'em.”